

Oversight Hearing on CUNY Start

Testimony Before the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education

Michael J. Weiss

*Senior Associate, Young Adults and Postsecondary Education
MDRC*

April 20, 2017

Thank you for the opportunity to offer some thoughts on CUNY Start.¹

My name is Michael Weiss, and I am a senior researcher at MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan social policy research organization that is dedicated to learning what works to improve policies and programs that affect the poor. Founded in 1974, MDRC evaluates existing programs and develops new solutions to some of the nation's most pressing social problems, using rigorous random assignment research designs or near-equivalents to assess their impact.

RELATIONSHIP WITH CUNY. Just over a decade and a half ago, MDRC began conducting rigorous evaluations in higher education, including the first-ever large-scale randomized controlled trial at a community college, here in New York City at Kingsborough Community College. Since that time, MDRC has conducted randomized experiments in over 30 community colleges across the nation, including more than 35,000 students. Within the City University of New York (CUNY) alone, MDRC has partnered on projects to evaluate the effectiveness of several different programs at CUNY, including learning communities, performance-based scholarships, CUNY ASAP, LaGuardia's GED Bridge program, and CUNY Start. This long-standing relationship demonstrates CUNY's willingness to partner with an independent third party and to allow its programs to undergo gold-standard evaluations so that CUNY can rely on credible evidence to inform its practice.

THE CHALLENGE. Each year hundreds of thousands of students in the United States enter college academically underprepared. At community colleges, underprepared students are typically referred to developmental (remedial) courses to build their reading, writing, and mathematics skills. About three of every five community college students are referred to at least one developmental course.² Students who are referred to developmental courses often strug-

¹Portions of this testimony are borrowed or adapted from:
www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building_College_Readiness_2016.pdf.

²Thomas Bailey, "Rethinking Developmental Education in Community College," *CCRC Brief* (New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2009).

gle in college, and graduation rates for this group are disconcertingly low.³ Similar to other urban community colleges across the nation,⁴ only 14 percent of students who were assessed as needing at least one developmental course graduated from CUNY's seven community colleges within three years.

CUNY START: A POTENTIAL SOLUTION. Hoping to boost the success rates of its least prepared incoming students, in 2009 the City University of New York developed CUNY Start, an innovative developmental education program. Students who participate in CUNY Start delay college matriculation for one semester, beginning instead with a semester of noncredit, time-intensive instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics with a prescribed curriculum and instructional approach. The program also provides enhanced academic advising, tutoring, and a weekly "College Success" seminar designed to build the skills that can help students succeed in college. Students pay only \$75 for CUNY Start, including the textbooks. The program's short-term goal is to substantially reduce or eliminate developmental needs after one semester, while preparing students for college courses.

Its long-term goal is to improve academic outcomes, including graduation rates.

CUNY Start is markedly different from the typical approach to developmental education, both with respect to the student experience and its theory of action. For students assessed as needing developmental course work, CUNY Start focuses exclusively and intensively on remedial education during a student's first semester in postsecondary education. In contrast, the typical approach has students take a mix of remedial coursework and college-level classes. As a result, it is expected that after one semester a student in CUNY Start will have fewer, or zero, remedial needs, but have earned zero college-level credits. In contrast, students taking a more typical path may have more remedial needs, but they will have earned some college-level credits.

According to CUNY's internal nonexperimental analyses of the program, it has yielded promising results for participating students.⁵ Due to CUNY's commitment to an independent, external evaluation, MDRC, CUNY, and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) at Teachers College, Columbia University, are partnering to determine the effect of CUNY Start on students' academic success, compared with the usual courses and services offered at CUNY's community colleges. This project, a large-scale, random assignment evaluation, is supported by the federal Institute of Education Sciences. The evaluation will also examine how CUNY Start is implemented and its costs.

WHAT QUESTIONS WILL WE ANSWER? The evaluation will provide rigorous evidence about the effect of CUNY Start on students' academic outcomes, relative to CUNY's traditional pathways for students who need significant developmental education. It will describe

³Paul A. Attewell, David E. Lavin, Thurston Domina, and Tania Levey, "New Evidence on College Remediation," *Journal of Higher Education* 77, 5 (2006): 886-924.

⁴MDRC calculations based on data from NCES QuickStats (<http://nces.ed.gov/datalab/quickstats>).

⁵See www.cuny.edu/academics/evaluation/library/CUNYStartStudyFall13.pdf.

how CUNY Start is implemented and its associated costs. Specifically, the evaluation will answer the following key questions:

- **What is the effect of CUNY Start on students' academic outcomes**, compared with the colleges' usual courses and services, including the colleges' usual developmental education?
- **Do the effects vary across student populations** (for example, full-time and part-time students, students with different degrees of developmental need) **and settings** (individual colleges)?
- **How is CUNY Start implemented?**
- **To what degree is it implemented with fidelity to the CUNY Start model?**
- **To what degree are there differences between the program and the colleges' usual courses and services?**
- **What are the costs associated with CUNY Start, how do the costs compare with the costs of the usual courses and services, and is CUNY Start cost-effective?**

Answers to these questions are critical for ongoing work at CUNY to improve the outcomes of students referred to remediation. Moreover, they are important to the national developmental education reform conversation, as few programs have been proven effective for students with significant remedial needs.

WHAT PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN THE PARTNERSHIP PROJECT? To date, over 3,800 students at four of CUNY's community colleges have consented to participate in the rigorous evaluation of CUNY Start. Academic outcome data for these students are not yet available. Early research from this project on the implementation of CUNY Start finds that the program model is generally being implemented as designed. MDRC, CCRC, and CUNY will begin writing the first major report from this study, including early indicators of academic progress, later this year. The report is expected to be publicly available in the spring of 2018.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE EVALUATION, SEE:

- www.mdrc.org/project/addressing-students-remedial-needs-evaluation-cuny-start-and-other-strategies#overview
- www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Building_College_Readiness_2016.pdf